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**Sutton Trust Submission to Sir Martin Harris:  
Widening Access to Selective Universities**

January 2010

# Executive Summary

- The Sutton Trust welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this review looking particularly at access to highly-selective universities.
- We need to ensure that background, location or financial situation are not barriers to entering selective universities for academically able young people. This requires a system which enables young people to reach their academic potential, and for them to receive appropriate and timely support, information, advice and guidance about their education options.
- Over and above access to higher education more generally, entry to selective universities matters because the graduates of these institutions go on to dominate the most sought-after and influential careers and, in general, earn significantly more over their lifetimes. Social mobility at the top is an important barometer of equality of opportunity in wider society.
- However, the evidence suggests that, despite considerable efforts by schools, universities and the government, the social background of those entering elite universities has not changed significantly over the last decade or so, and access is dominated by a small number of schools and colleges.
- The single most important factor contributing to the relatively low proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds attending these universities is the level and nature of qualifications obtained by these students. Each year 60,000 pupils who at some point were among the top fifth of academic performers do not enter higher education by age 19.
- There are also substantial numbers of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who do attain the qualifications needed for access to elite universities but who go elsewhere. Our research suggests these students number around 3,000 in each cohort.
- The main reasons for this are:
  - Aspirations: Young people do not always experience an environment which encourages them to 'aim high' or to understand that different universities and courses have different aims and may open up different opportunities later in life.
  - Advice: Many young people do not receive the advice and information they need to make sense of the increasing range of qualifications and options open to them. At present, there is considerable evidence that the advice they do get is not always well-timed, sufficient and of good quality.
  - Subject choice: Some A level subjects are regarded as 'non-preferred' by universities, but information about this is not always easily available. Pupils also need to be aware of the impact of GCSE subject choice on their options for post-16 study and beyond.
  - Choice of university: Students from independent schools are considerably more likely to apply to selective universities than those with similar levels of attainment at comprehensive

schools. This may be influenced by negative perceptions or misunderstanding of elite universities by some teachers.

- Financial issues: Even with grants, loans and bursaries available, undertaking a degree is a significant financial commitment which may deter students from disadvantaged backgrounds, or encourage them to apply to local universities to limit their expenditure. Many do not understand the likely differences in future earnings from different degree courses and institutions. This issue will come into sharper focus if the cap on fees is lifted and students have to make more complex choices about where to study and what to pay.
- Increasing aspirations to higher education generally is a crucial building block for fair access to selective institutions. However, it is particularly at age 14 plus that students need specific guidance to help them access selective courses and it is here in particular where elite institutions can add value.
- Activities designed to broaden the range of entrants to elite universities can be very cost-effective. An example is the summer school scheme pioneered by Sutton Trust, which is estimated to give individual beneficiaries a lifetime earnings return of £15 for every £1 spent.
- The Trust believes the following recommendations would all contribute to widening access to selective universities:

#### ***Information Advice and Guidance***

- Data on the financial returns to different degree courses should be published
- An effective and independent service for delivering impartial and specialist advice and guidance is needed for school pupils
- Every secondary school should have a lead teacher responsible for higher education information, advice and guidance at every Key Stage
- The most effective schemes for providing role models from alumni and the professions should be available in all state schools, particularly those serving poorer areas

#### ***Schools***

- Schools and colleges must ensure genuine opportunities are open to all students to pursue the 14-19 path that is most appropriate to their talents and interests
- Higher education destination data for all schools and colleges should be published
- More should be done in schools to foster the softer, non-academic skills of non-privileged young people

#### ***Admissions***

- There should be as few exceptions (for example, earlier deadlines and additional tests) as possible to the standard university admissions process

- The sector should work towards more coherence on university admissions tests, and evaluate their validity
- Universities should strive to be as transparent as possible about the entry requirements of courses and in particular should name clearly their 'preferred' and 'non-preferred' subjects
- The sector should move towards a full system of post-qualification applications (PQA)

#### ***Outreach and Access Schemes***

- Outreach programmes that are proven to work should be expanded, making use of institutions' particular expertise and exploiting key transition points
- A greater share of university fee income should be diverted to proven outreach work
- Selective universities should continue to use admission schemes which take account of students' educational and social context
- Even in the current climate, additional places should be created at selective universities for those on access schemes and / or from disadvantaged homes
- Improved strategic coordination of access work is needed so that it is targeted where it is most needed so that efforts are not duplicated

#### ***Bursaries and financial support***

- There should be more coherence across institutions in student financial support packages
- Bursary funds should be better diverted to those most in need and grant support should be reserved for those from the poorest homes
- Real interest rates should be applied to student loans, except for those taken out by low income students, with the savings used for widening access

## Introduction

The Sutton Trust exists to challenge educational inequality and prevent the subsequent waste of talent. It is particularly concerned with breaking the link between educational opportunities and family background, and in realising a system in which talented young people are given the chance to prosper, regardless of their background, the school they happen to attend or the area in which they live. We therefore welcome this opportunity to contribute to this important review on promoting access to selective universities.

There can be little doubt that obtaining a place at a selective university rightly demands high levels of academic attainment. But many factors contribute to attainment at 18 and to students' willingness to apply to selective universities and/or courses, and to their subsequent chances of success. And similarly, there is little doubt that relatively few young people from disadvantaged backgrounds currently attend our most prestigious universities.

The Trust sees the challenges as twofold. We need to ensure that those students who have the levels of attainment which could give them a place at a selective university, but who currently do not enter such institutions, have the skills, advice and support which would enable them to do so, and to make well-informed choices about future study. Secondly, and more broadly, we need to ensure that all academically able young people have the opportunity to reach their potential and to choose routes through education which enable them to achieve the levels of qualifications - in appropriate subjects - which would make them credible applicants to selective universities.

We note that the relatively low level of social mobility in the UK and wide and deep inequalities in access to high-quality education present significant barriers to increasing the numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds attending selective universities. But these raise issues of social and educational policy which are beyond the scope of this review.<sup>1</sup> Here, we have focussed on what might realistically work and what might be politically and financially feasible in this specific area.

In this submission, please note that:

- the findings refer mainly to young entrants to higher education, i.e. excluding mature students
- some results refer to England only, some to the UK as a whole
- different definitions of selective universities are used in different contexts
- there are also different definitions of disadvantage, based on social class, income, parental education, home postcode or schooling

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<sup>1</sup> But see [http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/summit\\_report.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/summit_report.pdf)

## Inequalities in access to selective universities

The proportion of non-privileged students at the UK's most academically selective universities<sup>2</sup> remains depressingly low and official figures show that progress has stalled in recent years. While there may have been progress in widening access to higher education more broadly, Government Performance Indicators in 2002/03, for example, showed that one in five young degree entrants to Russell Group institutions<sup>3</sup> were from the four lower class groups, compared with 28% of students in universities as a whole, and one in two of the wider population. These proportions were essentially unchanged in 2007/08.

While the number of young full-time first degree entrants to Russell Group universities increased by 18% from 2002/03 to 2007/08, the number coming from the four lowest socio-economic groups increased by 16%: a disappointing finding when considered against the considerable efforts made by these universities, schools and the government to ensure wider access.

Similar findings are apparent when we consider entry to the Sutton Trust 13 group of selective universities<sup>4</sup>. As the table below shows, after some progress in the late 1990s, the proportions of young people entering these universities from state schools, lower social classes and poor areas has remained more or less static since 2002/3.

'Sutton Trust 13' intake	1997/98	2001/2	2002/3	2005/6	2007/8
% from independent schools	39	35	32	33	33
% from state schools	61	65	68	67	67
% from lower social classes	13*	14*	16	17	16
% from low participation areas	6	7	8	8	4**

\*not comparable with future years; \*\* not comparable with previous years

2 Various definitions are used in this report, drawing on different data and classifications. A number of institutions are common to all groups.

3 Birmingham; Bristol; Cambridge; Cardiff; Edinburgh; Glasgow; Imperial College, London; King's College London; Leeds; Liverpool; London School of Economics & Political Science; Manchester; Newcastle; Nottingham; Oxford; Queen's. Belfast; Sheffield; Southampton; University College, London; Warwick

4 Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial College, London School of Economics, Nottingham, Oxford, St Andrews, University College London, Warwick and York.

Research also shows that entrants to selective universities are concentrated in certain geographical areas and neighbourhoods, and come from a relatively small number of schools and colleges:

- 80% of disadvantaged young people - those from low HE participation neighbourhoods - live in the vicinity of a highly-selective university,<sup>5</sup> but only 1 in 25 of these disadvantaged young people attends such a university (compared to 1 in 4 from the highest HE participation neighbourhoods).
- There are approximately 3,500 providers of post-16 education in the UK, but in the period 2002 to 2006, just 100 schools – all in England – accounted for a sixth of admissions to the 13 Sutton Trust universities. Overall, 200 schools accounted for nearly 30% of admissions to the universities, with almost half their students entering one of these 13 universities. The position was similar in 2007 and 2008 and further details are provided in the Appendix. In the whole of the UK, there are less than 20 maintained schools in which 40% of those applying to HE get a place at one of the Sutton Trust 13 universities.

These findings are largely accounted for by differences in attainment at A level. Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) Research Paper 5<sup>6</sup> shows that, overall, the HE participation rates of students with similar A level attainment at age 17 are relatively close to one another when comparing those studying in different types of schools, though the rate for sixth form and FE colleges is marginally lower. However, high attaining students in independent schools are more likely to participate in the most selective forms of HE than those in the maintained sector with similar levels of attainment. Further, those in sixth form and FE colleges are slightly less likely than those in other types of post-16 establishment to participate in this form of HE by age 19.

Analysis by Vignoles *et al.*<sup>7</sup> in the Sutton Trust's Report to the National Council for Educational Excellence, considered whether a class gap exists in university participation generally and for the 'Sutton Trust 13' group of leading universities in particular. The analysis found that a state school pupil entitled to free school meals stands the same chance of going to university as any other pupil if they achieve the appropriate A-level grades. However, young people on free school meals were marginally less likely to end up at one of the highly selective 'Sutton Trust 13' universities than their better off peers, even when prior attainment was taken into account.

These findings are backed up by analysis the Higher Education Funding Council undertook for the Sutton Trust<sup>8</sup>. This found that, each year, there are over 3,000 'missing' state school students who get the grades necessary to attend selective universities (again, defined as the 'Sutton Trust 13') but who end up at other institutions. Another way of looking at this is that students from independent schools are as likely to attend these leading universities as students from state schools who achieve two grades higher at A-level.

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5 Bath; Birmingham; Bristol; Cambridge; Cardiff; Durham; Edinburgh; Exeter; Glasgow; Imperial College; King's College London; Lancaster; Leeds; Leicester; Liverpool; London School of Economics & Political Science; Manchester; Newcastle; Nottingham; Oxford; Reading; Royal Holloway, London; Sheffield; Southampton; St Andrews; Strathclyde; Surrey; University College London; Warwick; York

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.dius.gov.uk/~media/publications/B/BIS-RP-005>

<sup>7</sup> Institute of education and Institute of Fiscal Studies

<sup>8</sup> 'The Missing 3000: state school students under-represented at leading universities', Sutton Trust, 2004.

The Trust's submission to the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee on Social Mobility and Access to the Professions<sup>9</sup>, summarised the very considerable body of evidence – economic, social and educational – suggesting that social mobility in the UK has levelled out for the most recent generations. There is some evidence suggesting a weakening of the association between family background and GCSE attainment in 2006, but it will be many years before it will be clear whether this results in greater social mobility: it may be that, in a society where the proportion of pupils getting good GCSEs increases, these achievements become less discriminating as predictors for later life and it will be post-16 qualifications which really matter. And, as we highlight in the next chapter, there is good evidence that the divide between the privileged and non-privileged is widening in this respect.

The Trust also believes that there are some indications that top end mobility (who makes it into the very highest income groups or professional positions) may have declined for more recent cohorts of adults, after the post-war boom in mobility. For example, a review of today's leading figures in a range of professions found that a majority were educated in fee-paying schools – partly, but not wholly, this is a function of inequalities in access to the elite universities which feed these careers.<sup>10</sup>

It is against this backdrop of stalled progress in reducing social divisions in access to selective universities that we present this paper.

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/Select\\_committee\\_June\\_09.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/Select_committee_June_09.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/ST\\_MilburnSubmission.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/ST_MilburnSubmission.pdf)

## Barriers to a more representative system

Young people can obtain a place at a selective university only if they choose to apply and if their A level results (or equivalent qualifications) are high enough and appropriate to the course they wish to study. Many of the factors contributing to meeting these conditions will have influenced young people long before they actually apply to university in the sixth form. These factors are, of course, inter-related, and it is unlikely that addressing any one of them in isolation would be sufficient to bring about the magnitude of change which is needed.

### Attainment

There is considerable evidence of differences in attainment emerging early on, with children from poorer homes being less school ready than their better off peers and bright children from low income homes slipping behind their less able but well off peers as primary school progresses<sup>11</sup>. These inequalities continue to widen in secondary school: for instance, two thirds of pupils on free school meals who are among the top fifth of performers at age 11 are not among the top fifth of performers at GCSE, and half do not go on to university. Overall, there are at least 60,000 pupils (10% of the cohort) who at some point were among the top fifth of performers in school – and therefore potentially university entrants - but who do not enter higher education by age 19.

Similarly stark inequalities are apparent when we consider the very highest achievers. One third of candidates with three A grades at A level are to be found in independent fee-paying schools which educate just 15% of the A level cohort – twice as many as might be expected. And, as the Conservative Party has reported, the number of boys at Eton who achieve three As at A level exceeds the number of boys on free school meals in the entire state system who did the same.

Figures produced by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) show how pupils from independent schools are increasing their percentage of A grades at A level more rapidly than pupils from other schools :<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/summary.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> From 'Data for centre types and regions, GCSE, Applied GCSE, ELC 2009, see [www.jcq.org.uk/national\\_results/news\\_releases/2009](http://www.jcq.org.uk/national_results/news_releases/2009)

### Improvements at grade A, 2002 to 2009, by school/college type

Type of school/college	Increase in percentage of A grades	
	2002 to 2008	2008 to 2009
Comprehensive	4	1
Secondary Modern	1	1
FE/6 <sup>th</sup> form college	5	1
Maintained selective	8	1
Independent	9	2

As A grades at A level increasingly become the norm for acceptances at a selective university, this widening divide between the maintained and independent sector is a considerable cause for concern. This is compounded by the introduction of A\* grades. Some universities, including Cambridge, now make all offers conditional on an A\* grade, but preliminary research from the Independent Schools Council suggests that, if this year's criteria for an A\* grade had been applied in 2009, over 16% of A level entries from its member schools would have achieved an A\*, more than twice the national average.

### Aspirations

Sutton Trust surveys consistently report that over 70% of 11-16 year olds say they are likely or very likely to enter higher education<sup>13</sup>, but this is not translated into university progression with just one third of 17-20 year olds entering university-level study. The main reasons young people cite for not continuing learning are that they want to start earning, avoid debt, and are frustrated or disillusioned with formal learning.

Over and above these general attitudes towards learning, there is evidence that students from non-privileged backgrounds do not aspire to research led universities in particular. According to a survey of teachers in post-16 schools and colleges<sup>14</sup>, two-thirds believed that able students from disadvantaged areas lacked the confidence to apply to universities with more demanding entry qualifications. About 80% believed that able students from disadvantaged areas lacked the confidence to apply to Oxford or Cambridge universities especially, and half believed that such students would find it difficult to cope socially at these institutions. These concerns are reflected in application patterns, even among relatively high performing students (see section below).

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/Mori080609.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/SupportingStudentsReport.pdf>

## **Advice**

Advice and guidance in schools and colleges regarding higher education is too often poor and ill-timed – a literature review for the Trust indicated at least half is judged by young people to be inadequate, not objective or unrealistic<sup>15</sup>. A significant part of the problem is due to structural problems around the distribution of expertise and lack of an effective independent and impartial service. Teachers are often not equipped with the time, expertise or knowledge to offer appropriate and objective advice to their students, particularly with regard to research-led universities, and there is sometimes a disconnect between teachers' perceptions of these universities and the reality. For example, in a recent study,<sup>16</sup> over 60% of the state school teachers questioned thought that less than 30% of students at Oxbridge were from state schools – when in fact it is 55%. Half of respondents also said they would not encourage even their brightest students to apply to those universities.

A recent report to Department for Children, Schools and Families<sup>17</sup> made the following points:

- many young people wanted advice at a younger age than that at which it is commonly available
- teachers delivering careers education need to be more knowledgeable about, and dedicated to careers education
- there is a need for careers coordinators with in-depth knowledge of the options, qualifications and pathways currently available to students
- the status of careers education and guidance, and careers coordinators, needed to be raised, with careers education having greater prominence in schools.

Similar points were made by the Sutton Trust in its submission to the National Council for Education Excellence<sup>18</sup>. In particular, we highlighted that poor standards of advice and guidance have a particularly negative impact on disadvantaged youngsters. While those from graduate and professional homes can turn to peers and family members for advice, those who do not have access to such networks rely on formal modes of delivery - from schools, colleges and Connexions - and any failure or shortcomings in them will be acutely felt.

There are also particular issues around pupils in 11-16 schools, who often find the transition to sixth form and university more difficult than those in 11-18 schools. Depending on the forms of post-16 provision available and the advice about alternative routes, they can be making decisions about where and what to study post-16 without sufficient understanding of the long-term implications of their decisions.

## **Subject choice**

Some of the differences in rates of application to, and success in obtaining a place at, a selective university are associated with subject choice at A level. Pupils from independent schools account for a disproportionate number of entries and top grades in the core sciences and modern languages, as the table below shows:

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<sup>15</sup> Reference needed

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.suttontrust.com/news.asp#a044>.

<sup>17</sup> 'Careers coordinators in schools', McCrone et al., DCSF

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/NCEE\\_interim\\_report.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/NCEE_interim_report.pdf)

**Table 7: Independent school A level entries and A grades as percentage of total entries and A grades**

	% of total entries (2008)	% of total A grades (2008)
Economics	33.1	48.4
Physics	22.7	35.3
Maths	21.3	31.4
Chemistry	21.2	33.5
Geography	19.5	32.5
History	17.7	33.0
Biology	17.2	30.5
English	10.7	23.5
<b>All subjects</b>	<b>14.8</b>	<b>28.6</b>

*Source: Independent Schools Council Bulletin 52*

The importance research-intensive universities place on the subjects studied at A-level is evidenced in 'The hard truth about soft subjects' by Policy Exchange, which highlighted, for example, that Biology, Chemistry, Further Mathematics, Mathematics and Physics comprised close to half of all accepted A-levels for Bristol University and University College London.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, A level choices are themselves determined, at least in part, by choices made considerably earlier, when young people are only 13 or 14. The Trust's recent study on attainment of pupils in schools with different levels of deprivation<sup>20</sup> found that the top 10% of pupils in poorer schools were ten times more likely than others to take certain vocational qualifications. Vocational options are appropriate for many students, but the Trust believes that a young person should not be more likely to pursue that route if he or she is from a poor background or attends a certain type of school.

Similarly, there has been a recent decline in the numbers of young people studying foreign languages in Key Stage 4, especially in schools serving challenging areas, and there are a relatively small number of maintained schools offering separate sciences at GCSE, which are the best preparation for science study at A level. The Russell Group has noted that almost one in four secondary schools in England no longer has any specialist physics teacher.<sup>21</sup>

Support to help students negotiate the complex system of qualification choices has never been more crucial, with a huge array of options at 14 and 16 – the diploma, the International Baccalaureate, the Cambridge Pre-U, modern apprenticeships as well as traditional A levels and GCSEs. Yet messages on the currency of these qualifications are confused: for example, while the government is keen to promote the diploma as a credible pathway to even the most selective degree courses, three quarters of teachers do not view it as a route to higher education.<sup>22</sup> This makes it very difficult for students and parents without their own expert knowledge to make informed decisions.

<sup>19</sup> Policy Exchange, 2008. This research was based on 13 Russell Group universities and 14 from the 1994 Group of Universities.

<sup>20</sup> Reference needed

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/russell-group-latest-news/112-2009/3800-sutton-trust-report/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.suttontrust.com/news.asp#a056>

## University choice

BIS Research Paper 5 shows that the higher participation rates in selective HE among students from independent and grammar schools can largely be explained by differences in the number and patterns of applications from different types of school or college, rather than differences in offer rates from universities.

The differences in 'willingness to apply' are striking: pupils from independent schools in the top fifth of schools according to average A level attainment, generally make twice as many applications to Sutton Trust 13 universities as their peers from comprehensive schools with similar overall levels of attainment.

And application rates from FE colleges<sup>23</sup> to 'Sutton Trust 13' universities are less than half of those from other types of schools, even when account is taken of the average overall levels of A level attainment. The analysis also shows that relatively few students attending FE colleges attain the A level results needed for entry to selective universities and courses (and, depending on local post-16 options, attending an FE college may itself reflect a considered decision about the path a student wishes to follow). However, if FE sector students had the same participation rates as those in selective state schools with similar "academic" A level attainment we would have expected over 1,000 extra students from the FE sector (including FE and sixth form colleges) to enter the 500 courses with the highest average entry qualifications by age 19.<sup>24</sup>

There is also some evidence that young people from state schools and lower income homes are more likely than their better off peers to choose a local university rather than one further afield, both for financial reasons and to maintain links with their family and friends<sup>25</sup>. There is certainly a perception that young people from non-traditional backgrounds are less likely to believe they will get in to and fit in at elite universities<sup>26</sup> which is linked to the wider question of aspirations.

## Financial issues

The admissions and student finance system is becoming increasingly complex and difficult to navigate for prospective students. There is a widespread lack of awareness of the financial support available<sup>27</sup> (which is often generous) and of the financial benefits of higher education, particularly among students from low income homes. There is some evidence too, which we will be exploring further, that students from non-privileged backgrounds do not recognise variations in earnings between higher education institutions, with many believing the wage returns are the same for all universities<sup>28</sup>

Recent problems at the Student Loans Company, resulting in delayed payment of grants and loans, will have done nothing to improve young people's perceptions of the potential financial implications of higher

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<sup>23</sup> Here, FE excludes sixth form colleges.

<sup>24</sup> To put this figure into context, this compares to 15,000 pupils in FE colleges who attain similar A-level scores (including at least one "traditional" subject), and 60,000 pupils from all schools and colleges who enrol at the 500 most selective degree courses.

<sup>25</sup> See <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/StaffordshireReportFinal.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> See for example, Reay, D., David, M. E. and Ball, S. J. 2005. *Degrees of Choice: Social class, race and gender in higher education*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books; Archer, L., Hutchings, M., and Ross, A. 2003. *Higher Education and Social Class: issues of exclusion and inclusion*. London: RoutledgeFalmer; Ball, S. J. 2003. *Class Strategies and the Educational Market: The middle classes and social disadvantage*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/StaffordshireReportFinal.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/UniversityStatus.pdf>

education. The current economic climate, with higher levels of unemployment, has led to increased numbers of students entering higher education, but whether this will be maintained, or whether this is having an impact of the types of student entering different universities, remains to be seen.

## Evidence of 'what works' from the Sutton Trust

### The effectiveness of widening participation schemes

It is certainly the case that universities, including highly-selective universities, have been working hard to ensure their intakes better reflect the population at large. But it is also clear that there is much more that needs to be done. Disappointingly, evidence of 'what works' in terms of access and widening participation is not as good as we might hope, partly because of the admirable sentiment 'to get on with the job' and the high costs of rigorous evaluation.

From our own experience of developing and funding projects over the last thirteen years, we note the following general points about effective interventions:

- Work to raise aspirations and widen participation in higher education generally is an important building block for ensuring fair access to selective universities – but selective universities can particularly add value at age 14 plus, when specific advice and guidance is needed to access certain courses and institutions.
- Events or activities need to be fairly intensive: residential programmes, campus visits and mentoring are amongst the most effective outreach schemes to boost aspirations whereas one-off, less intensive interventions do not have as strong an impact
- Links between schools and universities are seen as useful, but there is a lack of strategic co-ordination and concerns over sustainability
- Highly targeted interventions at certain key transition points – for example age 14, 16 and 18 – can also be particularly effective at 'switching' students on to a particular course of action and be delivered with minimum cost.

### Cost-effectiveness

With looming cuts in public services, the question of cost effectiveness and impact is particularly important. Rather than a burden on the Exchequer, our evidence suggests that programmes to widen access to selective universities can be very cost-effective in the long term. A recent economic analysis by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) found that educational programmes supported by the Trust produced individual benefits worth an average of £15 for every £1 spent. The most effective schemes were low cost and well-targeted, bringing individual financial returns of up to £30 for each £1 invested, plus there are a host of social benefits – better health, improved community participation, reduced crime – associated with improved educational outcomes.<sup>29</sup> We are commissioning a further piece of work from BCG looking at the cost effectiveness of rolling out some of these initiatives system-wide, to be published in February.

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<sup>29</sup> Investing for Impact, Boston Consulting Group, January 2008

## Summer schools

- During the last twelve years, over 10,000 students have attended one week Sutton Trust summer schools at Bristol, Cambridge, Nottingham, Oxford and (since 2002) St. Andrews' Universities.<sup>30</sup>
- Students attending one of the summer schools are considerably more likely to apply to, and to take up undergraduate places, at one of the host universities compared with similar students who applied for but did not attend the summer schools.
- Tracking data on the 2007 summer school cohort (who started university this Autumn) revealed that:
  - 6 in 10 students ended up in one of the elite Russell Group of 20 universities
  - One quarter ended up at one of the five host summer school universities
  - Application and admissions rates were significantly higher than for similarly well-qualified students from similar non-privileged backgrounds
- A previous study found that the impact of the summer schools was equivalent to having four additional GCSEs at grades A or A\*, or the difference between having parents with no formal qualifications and having at least one parent with a degree-level qualification, in relation to whether or not young people took up places at the summer school universities.
- For every pound spent on the Cambridge summer school, a discounted present value of £14 of extra earnings were generated for attendees over their lifetimes - a rate of return of 14 to 1.

## Reach for Excellence

- The Reach for Excellence (RfE) programme at Leeds University is an extended outreach scheme that provides support for a group of local highly-able 16 year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds with the aim of raising their chances of enrolling at a research intensive university. The programme operates over a two year period, providing advice sessions and lectures, a summer school, university visits and individual mentoring. It will benefit 360 students overall, across three consecutive year cohorts.
- Unlike many other projects of its kind, the impact of the scheme has been evaluated against a control group of similar students.
- Preliminary results show that Reach for Excellence students were more likely than similar students in the control group to enter a research intensive university, with just under half (49%) of RfE students entering these universities, compared with a quarter (25%) of those from the comparison group.
- RfE students were also more likely to enter higher education more generally: 85% of RfE students gained a place at university compared with 59% of similar students in the control group.

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<sup>30</sup> See [www.suttontrust.com/applyingtouniversitysummerschools.asp](http://www.suttontrust.com/applyingtouniversitysummerschools.asp) for further details

## **Academic Enrichment Programme**

- The Academic Enrichment Programme, which runs at Manchester, Birmingham and Nottingham Universities, is a year-long programme offering Year 12 the opportunity to explore the university experience in depth. It aims to develop the skills that will lead to success at A-level and beyond and also provides on-going guidance and support.
- It comprises a summer school, e-mentoring, revision classes and advice sessions, targeted at Year 12 students whose parents have not been to University and are in non-professional occupations.
- Over one third of students were accepted by a Russell Group University and almost half went to a research-led university (Russell Group and 94 Group) – both markedly higher than a comparator group with similar academic qualifications and social backgrounds.

## **STEP Easter scheme at Cambridge**

- An example of a highly focussed programme, this scheme targets state school pupils who already have a conditional offer from Cambridge in maths.
- It provides them with extra tuition for their Sixth Term Examination Paper during a short residential course, on the basis that their schools may not have the time and expertise to offer this assistance.
- Whereas the average success rate is 30%, half of those who took part in the course were successful and gained a place at the university.

## **Future developments**

The Trust is looking to build on its successes in this area and is particularly interested in schemes which, as far as possible, translate access work into undergraduate places in a concrete and direct way. The Trust is therefore piloting the Sutton Trust Academic Routes (STAR) programme at Exeter and Leeds universities over the next three years. The scheme – which is a modification of a US percent scheme, attached to a comprehensive access programme – aims to support a number of academically able students from local schools serving disadvantaged areas on a clear pathway to a research-led university.

The programme will target able students pre-GCSE, in order to support them through the transition into further education. It will join up existing initiatives in to one clearly communicable and navigable package, underpinned by the promise of a clear route into selective higher education, should the student reach a minimum standard of academic achievement and participate in certain activities. The scheme will recognise the extra barriers that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face in applying to research led universities and will include an alternative, lower offer.

Importantly, the effectiveness of the scheme is being gauged through a randomised control study – the first of its kind for an access initiative of this type.

## The policy challenge

Much of what needs to be done to improve access to elite universities for those from disadvantaged backgrounds is also what needs to be done to widen participation in higher education generally. However, as detailed in previous chapters, there are specific barriers young people face in terms of selective universities - and therefore particular solutions which need to be included in a more general, broader approach to access.

Indeed, the issue of who gets places at which universities will be even more relevant over the coming years. The economic downturn is likely to increase demand for post-18 education, but the number of places in all universities are set to be frozen at current levels. Access efforts will therefore have to adjust from operating in a situation which has seen unprecedented expansion, to a situation in which a place for one student might mean another young person is denied that opportunity. It is imperative for social mobility, however, that despite this 'displacement effect' we continue our efforts to give students from disadvantaged backgrounds a fair chance to attend the most selective universities, so that these institutions genuinely do get the best candidates, rather than those who are simply the most materially and culturally privileged.

Of course, there is a strong argument that places at universities should be expanded as a route out of economic recession<sup>31</sup>. Certainly the wage premiums attached to degrees from highly-selective institutions suggest that the financial benefits to the individual and society far outweigh the costs. So while a wholesale expansion of HE places looks increasingly unlikely in the short and medium terms, additional places at selective universities specifically reserved for those from disadvantaged backgrounds can be justified, in our eyes, as making economic sense and boosting social mobility too. This idea is explored in the recommendations below.

### Information, advice and guidance

Aside from raising attainment in schools, improving the quality of the information and support students receive is the most significant way to improve access to university. Awareness-raising about higher education needs to start early: certainly by the later years of primary education and continuing into the first years of secondary education. For older pupils a more focused approach is needed, which is more tailored to the needs of individual students and which allows them to understand what different universities have to offer. This more specific approach needs to include information, advice and guidance before young people make their GCSE subject choices during Year 9. In this regard, we would suggest that:

- Data on the financial returns to individual courses at different universities should be published and easily accessible. While we do not underestimate the challenges of making this information robust, it is important that all young people can clearly see the differential returns to HE when making their

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<sup>31</sup> See for example the OECD's report at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/8242831.stm> and the Russell Group's announcement - <http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/russell-group-latest-news/121-2010/4061-cuts-will-devastate-uk-universities/>

choices – particularly if higher and more variable fees are to be introduced.

- An effective and independent service for delivering impartial and specialist IAG is needed. Impartiality is critical so that students make informed choices based on their talents and aspirations, not the prejudices of staff or the default pathway for their school / college. Once these are made, specialist and tailored advice is critical as one advisor cannot possibly have all the necessary knowledge. Selective universities may have a particular role here, contributing personnel to local or regional pools of experts.
- Role models can have a transformative effect on aspirations and make a valuable contribution to information advice and guidance, so the most effective schemes should be available in all state schools, prioritising those with the lowest progression rates. The Future First<sup>32</sup> project running in Camden is one example, which brings the benefits of school-alumni links to state comprehensives. It does this through a brokerage network that joins up comprehensive educated professionals with their old schools, or schools in their area, to offer concrete support and access to opportunities like work experience and internships. In line with the recommendations made by Alan Milburn's panel on fair access to the professions, we also believe there is a role for the professions here in offering opportunities to able, disadvantaged young people. The Pathways to Law scheme provides a template for others to follow.<sup>33</sup>

## Schools

Again, the big challenge for schools and colleges is in ensuring that greater numbers of students from poorer backgrounds gain the necessary qualifications to progress to selective universities – although we do not underestimate the scale of that task. That aside, schools clearly have an important role in shaping aspirations, fostering 'soft' skills and providing information, advice and guidance (IAG), although, as noted earlier, this is all too often inadequate. We therefore recommend:

- Schools, working together and in partnership with colleges and local authorities, must ensure genuine opportunities exist for all students to pursue the 14-19 path that is most appropriate to their talents and interests. For example, does every student who wants to study separate science GCSEs and traditional A levels have that option if it is not offered in their school or in local colleges? Do these schools and colleges have sufficiently skilled staff? Do all students have the full range of diploma choices available to them? Ensuring they do is a huge logistical issue, but without such a guarantee, an even greater divide will open up between different qualification pathways, which is based on background and location, not ability or interest.
- Every secondary school should have a lead teacher responsible for higher education information, advice and guidance at every Key Stage (ages 11-14, 14-16 and 16-18). This teacher would require

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<sup>32</sup> [www.futurefirst.org.uk](http://www.futurefirst.org.uk)

<sup>33</sup> [www.pathwaystolaw.org](http://www.pathwaystolaw.org)

training and support, and dedicated time, to fulfil this role: it cannot just be an extra task added to an existing workload. This post is also essential for effective coordination of IAG between the school and any external bodies, organisations and universities providing specialist advice and opportunities.

- Destination data of all schools and colleges should be published. This would not only give parents and students useful information about the institution, it would also help to focus senior staff attention on IAG and the outcomes that stem from it. Some of this will, in due course, be achieved through the government's 'Framework for excellence' which will provide information on the number of learners going into higher education. We recommend some further disaggregation of this number, in order to allow monitoring of the type of higher education to which learners are progressing.
- More should be done to foster the softer, non academic skills of non-privileged young people, which are becoming increasingly important. Leading universities, faced with many academically well-qualified applicants for every place, are looking for evidence of other skills and attributes in selecting students: self-confidence, motivation, articulacy, and a genuine interest in the subject. But there are clearly some schools that are better at developing these qualities in their pupils than others. The question is what 'added value' is being offered by these schools and how it can be made available to all young people. We believe that part of this is due to the extra-curricular activities. Debating clubs, cadet forces, sports clubs, theatre and drama opportunities – often there are many more of these activities in schools serving affluent communities. But programmes like Debate Mate<sup>34</sup> and the Children's University<sup>35</sup> have had great success in getting into schools serving deprived areas, improving a host of soft and hard outcomes as a result.

## Admissions

Highly-selective universities are increasingly seeking ways to improve the methods by which they select from among many well-qualified applicants for a limited number of places. The variety of ways in which they are doing this adds to the complexity of the university application process and may disadvantage those pupils from schools with less experience of dealing with these universities and from individuals who lack the confidence to apply. We make the following recommendations.

- There should be as few exceptions (for example, earlier deadlines and additional tests) as possible to the standard admissions process.
- Related to that, the sector should work towards more coherence on university admissions tests, and the validity of these – and their impact on access – should be evaluated. In particular, the necessity to undertake admission tests should not be a financial disincentive to potential applicants, and tests should seek to identify candidates' underlying ability and aptitude, rather than be a measure of the quality of the teaching (and possibly additional tutoring) they have experienced. We do not underestimate the technical difficulties of devising appropriate tests.

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.debatemate.com>

<sup>35</sup> [www.childrensuniversity.co.uk](http://www.childrensuniversity.co.uk)

- Universities should strive to be as transparent as possible about the entry requirements of courses and in particular 'preferred' and 'non-preferred' subjects. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) should take a lead on improving transparency about subject preference via their website, and should strongly encourage universities to be clear about any non-preferred subjects in explicit terms in their entry profiles.
- We believe that the higher education sector should move towards a full system of post-qualification applications (PQA) as soon as possible. We note the introduction of the 'post-qualification adjustment' period but this is largely irrelevant to highly-selective universities who are oversubscribed with suitably qualified candidates and have no reserved places to allocate. There is mixed evidence as to whether the use of predicted grades disadvantages students from less privileged backgrounds, but it is clear that the use of predicted grades, many of which differ markedly from those actually achieved by students, is inherently unfair to all students.

### **Outreach and access schemes**

As noted earlier, while the evidence on the efficacy of access work is by no means as complete as we may like, there are a number of example of good practice and, certainly, there is a convincing argument that, without the efforts of the last decade or so, rising inequalities would have meant that access to highly-selective universities would be even more skewed against the disadvantaged. We recommend:

- Expanding what works in outreach, making use of institutions' particular expertise and exploiting key transition points. In a difficult economic climate cost effectiveness and impact are critical. Yet because of the high financial returns to degrees from selective universities, a strong case can be made for redoubling efforts to broaden access to these institutions. Analysis suggests, for example, that expanding the Sutton Trust summer school model to all Russell Group universities would generate financial benefits of 40 to one. And, of course, evaluation of initiatives is critical.
- Bearing in mind the comments on bursaries, below, selective institutions should consider whether diverting more fee income to proven outreach work would be a more effective means of widening access.
- Selective universities should continue to trial admission schemes which take account of students' educational and social context, in order to build up a solid evidence base for this practice. Such schemes – and the use of alternative tests and courses to assess academic potential - are in widespread use across the world by highly-selective universities. All the studies we are aware of suggest that young people admitted through such programmes do at least as well academically as other students at university – and, perhaps even more importantly, prosper in life after graduation.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The most substantial UK study to date found that, overall, pupils from state schools do as well at university as pupils from independent schools with up to two grades higher in their A-levels and that pupils from low performing state schools did not do consistently better or worse at university than students from high performing state schools with the same A-level grades.

- While the expansion of university places at the rate seen in the last decade or so is perhaps unrealistic, there should nonetheless be a modest expansion of places at selective universities, with these additional places reserved for non-privileged students who have participated on access and admissions schemes.
- It remains important that there is strategic coordination of access work so that it is targeted where it is most needed and that efforts are not duplicated. We welcome the work of HEFCE in this respect, including the new requirement for higher education institutions to submit widening participation strategic assessments, building on the information in their Access Agreements, and in its support for developing school/university partnerships. It is of continuing importance that widening participation strategies are developed and monitored at a time when universities' budgets are coming under pressure.

### **Bursaries and financial support**

While there is no evidence that the current student finance regime has deterred students from disadvantaged homes, we know that debt remains a significant concern for many from poorer background and is an often cited as the reason for leaving education. The prospect of higher and more variable fees in the future may also start to deter some students, as well as affecting their choice of institution and subject. We therefore recommend:

- There should be more coherence in student support packages so that these are easier for pupils, parents and teachers to understand and for clear messages to be communicated. One could envisage, for example, a 'Russell Group' guarantee which meant that all students eligible for a full grant received a certain level of bursary across the 20 universities, which could be widely publicised. Moves by government to simplify the current loan and grants system would also be welcome.
- Bursary funds should be better diverted to those most in need and grant support should be reserved for those from the poorest homes. At present, some bursary and grant support is available to students from homes with incomes well above the national average. In a time of spending constraints, universities and government should consider whether this money would be better spent elsewhere, either on more support for low income students or on other measures to widen access (for example outreach work or additional places).
- Real interest rates should be applied to student loans, except for those taken out by low income students. The savings made should be diverted to more outreach work and to expanded places at selective universities, set aside for non-privileged young people participating in access schemes.

## **Conclusion**

This section has considered a range of strategies that we suggest can broaden the range of young people entering our most selective universities. Some are relatively inexpensive and easy to implement, at least on a local scale. Some have the potential to have an impact within a relatively short period. Others require much greater investment or may take several years to have an influence. What matters is that existing work on widening the intake of our selective universities is continued and enhanced, with greater overall coherence, strategic direction and clear purpose.

Now is certainly the time to invest in access. In its submission last year to the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, the Trust set out the arguments for investment in education during a recession. The submission also noted that the Government's White Paper on Mobility argued that there could be a new upward wave of social mobility as the UK prospered in the global economy. Such a shift will only happen if continued action is taken to ensure the brightest and best are admitted to our most prestigious university courses, regardless of where and to whom they were born, and the student finance system supports those who need it, while offering our institutions the income they need to remain world class.

That is a great challenge, made all the more difficult by the current economic circumstances.

## Appendix: Admissions to selective universities 2007 and 2008

Data provided by UCAS enabled us to calculate the numbers and percentages of pupils from different types of school/college entering the Sutton Trust 13 universities. Similar information was provided by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge for their admissions in these two years.

The data provided is not directly comparable with that presented in the Sutton Trust's earlier report 'University admissions by individual schools',<sup>37</sup> but do provide an insight into the continuing dominance of entry to selective universities by a relatively small number of schools and colleges.

In the following tables, note the following:

- C: comprehensive schools
- FE: general FE colleges (including tertiary colleges in England)
- G: grammar schools
- I: independent schools
- SFC: sixth form colleges.

The analysis is based on UK students from UK schools and colleges only, excluding mature students.

### ***Acceptances by type of school/college***

**Table A1: Acceptances at Sutton Trust 13 universities by year**

	Percentage of admissions					
	C	FE	G	I	SFC	Total
2007	34.6%	4.4%	15.8%	33.2%	12.0%	100.0%
2008	34.9%	4.7%	15.8%	32.6%	12.0%	100.0%

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<sup>37</sup> <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/UniversityAdmissions.pdf>

**Table A2: Acceptances at Oxford and Cambridge by year**

	<b>C</b>	<b>FE</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>SFC</b>	<b>Total</b>
2007	23.6%	2.5%	18.6%	45.5%	9.8%	100.0%
2008	24.6%	2.5%	20.0%	42.7%	10.1%	100.0%

Table A1 shows a very similar pattern for the two years, but Table A2 does show an increasing percentage of entrants to Oxbridge from the maintained sector, and a corresponding decrease in the proportion from the independent sector. More detailed analysis suggests that is primarily due to changes in the composition of the Cambridge entry cohort.

***Concentration of admissions to selective universities in a few schools and colleges***

A relatively small number of schools and colleges provide a large proportion of all acceptances at the Sutton Trust 13 universities.

**Table A3: Acceptances to Sutton Trust 13 universities**

**Percentage of all acceptances**

**N of schools/colleges**

Top 5	3.0%
Top 30	10.4%
Top 100	24.1%
Top 200	37.5%
The rest	62.5%

(2007 and 2008 data combined)

Table A3 shows that almost a quarter of those entering Sutton Trust universities (excluding non-UK and mature students) are from just 100 UK schools and colleges, and almost 40% are from 200 schools and colleges, out of a total of well over 3000.

Taking the combined 2007/2008 figures:

- the top 5 schools and colleges consist of 2 independent schools and 3 sixth form colleges<sup>38</sup>
- the top 30 consist of 5 grammar, 14 independent, 5 SFC and 1 comprehensive

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<sup>38</sup> Sixth form colleges typically have very large numbers of students, so a large number of admissions from these colleges does not necessarily represent a high 'hit rate'.

- the top 100 consist of 7 comprehensives, 4 FE, 20 grammar, 42 independent, 27 SFC
- the top 200 consist of 17 comprehensives, 7 FE, 46 grammar, 94 independent, 36 SFC

**Table A4: Acceptances to Oxbridge**

N of schools/colleges	Percentage of all acceptances		
	Cambridge	Oxford	Oxbridge
Top 5	3.5%	3.9%	3.7%
Top 30	13.4%	15.6%	14.5%
Top 100	29.3%	32.3%	30.8%
Top 200	42.6%	46.2%	44.4%
The rest	57.4%	53.8%	55.6%

(2007 and 2008 data combined)

Table A4 shows that three in every ten Oxbridge undergraduates (excluding non-UK and mature students) are from just 100 UK schools and colleges, and almost 45% are from 200 schools and colleges. The remaining 3000+ schools contribute about 55% of admissions. This shows little change from the results in the earlier report (covering 2002-2006) although the dominance of the top 200 schools and colleges has reduced slightly.

Oxford is slightly more dominated by a relatively small number of schools and colleges than Cambridge.

Taking the combined Oxbridge figures:

- the top 5 schools and colleges consist of 3 independent schools and 2 sixth form colleges
- the top 30 consist of 6 grammar, 19 independent, 5 SFC
- the top 100 consist of 4 comprehensives, 1 FE, 24 grammar, 60 independent, 11 SFC
- the top 200 consist of 13 comprehensives, 7 FE, 51 grammar, 105 independent, 24 SFC.

***Proportions of applicants to HE accepted at selective universities.***

There are about 40 schools in which, in 2008, at least half the applicants to HE were accepted at one of the Sutton Trust 13 universities. All but three of these were independent schools. In the whole of the UK, there are less than 20 maintained schools in which 40% of those applying to HE get a place at one of the Sutton Trust 13 universities.

Even those pupils in most of England's grammar schools are attending schools in which less than a third of pupils go on to one of these universities. In most schools and colleges, the proportion is much less than this, and this provides a real challenge in providing appropriate support and advise to those young people who have the capacity to attend an elite university.

Similarly, there are about 15 schools – all independent - where at least 20 percent of applicants to HE are accepted at Oxbridge. But perhaps more optimistically, there are about 20 grammar schools in which at least 1 in 10 pupils go on to Oxbridge.